

# Putin's intervention in Crimea has effectively marginalised his domestic opposition in Russia

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31/03/2014

*What has the impact of the crisis in Crimea been on Vladimir Putin's domestic political situation? [Luke March](#) writes that there has always been a clear distinction between 'systemic' opposition parties, who are tolerated by the Kremlin, and 'non-systemic' opposition movements, which have little access to the media or state funding. He argues that the net effect of the situation in Crimea has been to marginalise these non-systemic groups and bolster public support for Vladimir Putin's regime, although it remains to be seen how lasting this effect will be.*



The massive global hit film *The Hunger Games* depicts a dystopian future, wherein a once-rebellious population is cowed by televised fights to the death that reinforce their obeisance to the avuncular but sinister President Snow. The Games force both viewers and players to remember and celebrate the iron grip of the Capitol; every victory reinforces the abased atomisation of the opposition before a cynically sympathetic regime. Is drawing a parallel with Russia a step too far?

## Ukraine and the Russian opposition: the Anger Games

Although Russian opposition parties' combat is seldom life-threatening, it is also rich in invective fulmination and (occasionally) spectacle, and their activity is heavily and ingeniously manipulated in ways that reinforce the Kremlin's authority. The 'systemic opposition' (three parties in the State Duma and several kept in reserve outside parliament) engages in 'licensed' criticism of government economic policy, but rarely criticises the executive directly: rather such parties act as sycophantic supplicants for Presidential favour, spar with each other and direct real or manufactured anger against the West or the non-systemic opposition equally. The latter are *personae non grata*, denied the media access, state funding and privileges of the Duma cartel, and facing an imaginative range of 'administrative resources' (dirty tricks) if they are not too busy tearing each other apart (which they regularly do).

If for a while following the 2011-12 elections it looked like the street opposition was finally breaking out of its ghetto, it is clear that Russia's annexation of Crimea has imposed a decisive marginalisation that will be a long time in undoing. It is likely that quelling potential domestic criticism and shoring up Putin's softening domestic support was one of the Kremlin's principal motivations. After all, a narrative of corrupt authoritarian leaders being overthrown by street protest in a fraternal state has obvious implications; far better that the (real) presence of the radical right on the Maidan be inflated into a 'US-backed unconstitutional fascist coup' which can thereby be utterly de-linked from any parallels back home.

Domestically, the Kremlin propaganda machine has tweaked some veteran Sovietesque tropes to transform an obviously popular political move into an orgy of jingoism. While the population rallies round the flag and Putin's rating hits stratospheric heights, politicians wear [St. George ribbons](#) to demonstrate patriotism and



Grand Kremlin Palace, Credit: Bernt Rostad (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

dissenters are increasingly framed as '[national traitors](#)'. Just as with the 2004 atrocity in Beslan, the Kremlin has used a crisis to accelerate previously mooted grand plans, in this case, '[cleaning house](#)' with opposition media.

### **The Duma opposition as willing cheerleaders**

The systemic opposition has played a key role in this evolving dramaturgy. It has long been the case that the Duma parties do not dissent from the Kremlin foreign policy consensus except in a more hard-line direction, and so it has proved. Perhaps because its loyalist credentials were suspect in 2011-12 when it threatened to defect to the street opposition, the would-be social democratic Just Russia party has been the initiator of several of the main initiatives (including [revising legislation](#) to facilitate incorporating new subjects into Russia). Party leader Sergei Mironov managed to get slapped with US/EU [sanctions](#) as a result.

The national-populist Liberal Democratic Party (whose proclamations often act as diversions from substantive issues) has made headlines by [proposing](#) the elimination of the vowel ы from the Russian language (because of its 'nasty Asiatic' character) and [arguing](#) that Ukraine should cede territory to Poland. For its part, the Communist Party completely agreed with Putin's position, adding that the 'Little Russians' (i.e. Ukrainians) had a 1,000-year history of friendship and peace alongside their 'Great Russian' brethren, and [castigating](#) 'so-called Western democrats' for forgetting that only with the USSR had they defeated fascism.

The 20 March Duma vote for incorporating Crimea within Russia was carried by a 445-1 majority (of 450), with the sole dissenter being former Just Russia member Ilya Ponomarev, who [justified](#) his position on the basis that the decision would provoke war with Ukraine. A [fuller rebuttal](#) of the Kremlin's position was offered by Yabloko, a non-parliamentary 'systemic opposition' party. The vitriolic reaction to these dissident interventions on the Russian blogosphere showed that the 'criticism=traitor=fascist' discourse ran deep.

### **Dividing the street opposition**

The non-systemic opposition have been completely blindsided by the crisis, which has opened old divisions and incised many new ones. Their poster-boy Alexei Navalny found himself under house arrest without internet access from 28 February (it is still unclear how coincidental this is), and his Livejournal account was blocked as soon as he opposed the intervention. Nevertheless, he still managed to write an op-ed in the *New York Times* calling for targeted sanctions on financiers close to the Kremlin's inner circle. That a number of these individuals soon appeared on US and EU [sanctions lists](#) will hardly help his prospects of a future without incarceration, to put it mildly.

Of the non-imprisoned opposition, it is largely liberals such as PARNAS party leader Boris Nemtsov and Democratic Choice movement leader Vladimir Milov who have articulated critiques of the Crimea intervention, describing it as [mendacious, costly and counter-productive](#). Their opposition (and that of the Pussy Riot collective) may merely justify Putin's narrative of liberal extremism, however.

Elsewhere, former opposition comrades have taken diametrically opposing positions. Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov argued that the Crimea referendum was a [real example](#) of people's democracy, and called for excluding opponents of this view from a united opposition (his supporters even picketed the Ukrainian embassy). As an avowed Soviet restorationist, such views are hardly surprising (his Facebook page marked the 16 March vote in Crimea by portraying a massive USSR state symbol), but perhaps they also show attempts to ingratiate himself during his own ongoing trial on insurrection charges. Either that, or his support for Putin merely marks him as complicit in his own exploitation.

Simultaneously, Other Russia leader Eduard Limonov, who previously could be relied on to lambast his fellow oppositionists as insufficiently anti-Putin, has organised demonstrations in favour of the Crimea annexation. This formerly beyond-the-pale extremist, whose parties have never been allowed to register, was even afforded a page in the pro-government *Izvestiya*, where he [denounced](#) Yulia Tymoshenko as a 'rat' and argued that the Crimea vote

showed the wish of all its population (Ukrainians and Tatars included) to escape the embrace of the Sashko Billys (a Right Sector leader Oleksandr Muzychko, who was shot by police on 24 March).

Limonov's intervention shows that many nationalist elements of the opposition (with Navalny the principal exception), are happy to set aside previous antagonisms towards Putin to defend Russian speakers against the 'fascist threat'. With Putin's evident shift towards traditionalist nationalist positions since his 2012 re-election increasingly consolidated, he has repaired his shaky electoral coalition by thoroughly side-lining those liberals and pragmatists who were once ex-President Dmitri Medvedev's potential support base, and forging a neo-conservative consensus.

How long will the Crimea effect continue to divide and disorientate? 'Rally round the flag' effects are transient, and the opposition might draw succour from the fact that Putin's previous record support after the 2008 Georgia conflict did not prevent mass protests three years later. Opinion polls show that Putin's support is relatively soft (some 30-50 per cent of the electorate might support another candidate in 2018, although not the current alternatives).

On the other hand, a constant stoking of nationalist resentment against outside enemies, in conditions of restricted media, gives limited prospects that the opposition can even raise awareness of any domestic issues that might enable a concerted assault on Putin's record. A key question at the time of writing is whether this nationalistic hysteria might lead a Kremlin, dizzy with success, to contemplate further foreign misadventures, in which case opposition will be muzzled still further.

In *The Hunger Games*, President Snow's demise only begins when his Head Gamemaker defects, joins forces with the players and activates a previously-silent network of intra-elite dissidents. Previous 'revolutions' in the post-Soviet space, not least the fall of Yanukovich, have relied on elite splits catalysing political opposition. Putin grasps this and his post-election strategy is predicated on stigmatising any potential dissent. It's still far too early to guess whether the tactical masterstroke of the Crimea annexation results in the strategic gains Putin envisages, or the enforced public conformity will blind him to dangers from within.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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